

In 2014, press freedom continued to suffer from the effects of the economic crisis. Many media outlets have closed or cut staff in recent years, as public expenditures and the advertising market contracted. This has led to a decline in media diversity, expanding political influence, increased self-censorship, and a deterioration in the independence and quality of reporting.

Legal Environment

Freedom of expression is guaranteed in Section 20 of the constitution, and press freedom is generally respected in practice, though the media face legal threats including defamation suits. The authorities monitor websites and social-network accounts that publish hate speech and advocate terrorism or xenophobia. In April 2014, a police operation resulted in 21 arrests for glorifying terrorism or humiliating its victims on Twitter. In November, a new Intellectual Property Act reinforced the blockage of websites containing or linking to copyrighted content that is used without permission. The law also established the so-called Google Tax, a system of mandatory economic charges applied to news aggregators to compensate news producers. Google deemed the new system “not sustainable,” and in December it announced the shutdown of its news service in Spain starting January 1, 2015.

In late 2013, the government proposed a controversial citizens’ security bill, the Ley Orgánica para la Protección de la Seguridad Ciudadana, which would greatly restrict a citizen’s right to protest and had worrying implications for freedom of expression. Although it was revised during 2014, the many remaining areas of concern included fines of up to €600,000 (\$800,000) for “very grave” violations such as organizing demonstrations near critical infrastructure; up to €30,000 for “grave” offenses like causing disturbances outside the parliament or the unauthorized use of images of public officials or members of the security forces when it could endanger the individuals, their families, protected facilities, or a security operation; and up to €600 for minor violations such as lack of respect toward a member of the security forces. All of the bill’s penalties would be imposed as administrative fines, outside a court of law. The legislation was approved by the lower house of parliament in December 2014, and was awaiting approval in the Senate at year’s end.

A new freedom of information law passed in late 2013, the Transparency Act, took effect in December 2014. However, advocacy organizations criticized it for failing to recognize the right to access information as a fundamental right; exempting certain types of government information, such as internal communications, drafts, or opinions; and creating an oversight body that lacks independence.

Political Environment

Although Spanish media continue to cover a wide range of perspectives, journalists and other observers have alleged growing government influence at the Corporación Radio Televisión Española (RTVE), which oversees public media. Under a 2012 reform, the head of RTVE is elected by a simple majority vote in the parliament, down from the previous two-thirds majority. Changes in the body’s leadership at the end of 2014 were interpreted by critics as a sign of increased government control ahead of elections in 2015.

Political interference at private newspapers has also reportedly increased. In February 2014, *El Mundo* dismissed editor in chief and founder Pedro Ramírez. The paper had been particularly active in denouncing

institutional and financial corruption among members of the ruling Popular Party and the royal family. Although the owner, publishing company Unidad Editorial (owned in turn by Italy's RCS Group), said the decision was based on the daily's poor financial performance, Ramírez considered his removal to be the consequence of "a brutal campaign from the government." He continued to publish a weekly opinion article in the paper until November, when *El Mundo* rejected a piece that harshly criticized Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy.

A similar situation occurred in June, when RBA, publisher of the weekly satirical magazine *El Jueves*, decided to remove a front-page cartoon showing King Juan Carlos passing his son a crown filled with excrement. Cartoonists Manel Fontdevila and Albert Monteys decided to quit, and six colleagues followed suit in solidarity.

Journalists claim that self-censorship in general has risen due to political pressure and the threat of layoffs amid the ongoing economic crisis.

Violence against journalists has occurred only sporadically in recent years, but reporters have faced physical assaults while covering economic and political protests. In March 2014, police officers attacked at least five journalists during a demonstration, drawing criticism from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe media representative and Spain's Federation of Journalist Unions.

Economic Environment

Spain has a diverse media sector, including both public and private outlets, but still lacks a regulatory framework for private, nonprofit media, as called for in the Audiovisual Law of 2010. Private ownership is concentrated in the hands of a few large companies, particularly after deregulation of ownership rules in 2009 allowed the creation of a de facto duopoly in private broadcasting, with Atresmedia and Mediaset controlling 70 percent of the private television networks. However, a Supreme Court decision in 2014 ordered the closure of nine private channels, including several owned by Atresmedia and Mediaset, on the grounds that their digital terrestrial broadcasting licenses had been issued without a public tender process. The licenses of eight other channels were being reviewed by the court at year's end.

Approximately 76 percent of the population had access to the internet in 2014. With the decline of traditional media, Spain has experienced a rapid increase in the use of digital media, which has benefited social minorities and supported political pluralism and digital activism.

The economic crisis has seriously affected Spain's media industry. According to the Madrid Press Association, between 2008 and 2014, 364 media outlets closed, and 11,875 journalists lost their jobs, with nearly 2,400 laid off in 2014. Many newspapers receive either large subsidies from the government or funding from banks and large corporations. Lack of transparency regarding the government's advertising purchases is a major problem: More than 75 percent of the €140.6 million invested in 2014 fell under the category of "commercial advertising," as opposed to "institutional advertising," and was consequently out of detailed public control. Although independent editors urged lawmakers to address this issue in the new Transparency Act, no changes were made.